



DISMOUNTED

Night Attack

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With the Army's emphasis in recent years on mounted tactical operations, a dismounted night attack seems to have become a job for special operations forces, not for mechanized infantry. As an integral part of the combined arms team, however, mechanized infantry units, through well-planned, vigorously executed, dismounted night attacks, can significantly improve the chances for success of mounted operations.

Night gives a dismounted infantryman a singular advantage over his mounted adversary: Through stealth, he can move over virtually any kind of terrain, maneuver around choke points, and, in many instances, walk onto an objective undiscovered and therefore unopposed. To exploit this advantage, though, the infantryman must be thoroughly prepared to operate at night, and this is the key element in conducting successful night attacks.

The preparation for a dismounted night attack begins



with a mission analysis and a detailed reconnaissance of the area of operations as a prelude to the development of a tactical plan. The plan itself must be simple and it must spell out the measures needed to insure proper command and control of the participating units.

Once the plan has been developed, it should be rehearsed as often as time will permit. The soldiers must know and fully understand their roles so that the operation can proceed on its own momentum once the units cross the line of departure. Accordingly, commanders must adhere stringently to the established troop leading procedures, especially the one-third/two-thirds rule.

A dismounted night attack by mechanized infantry units — particularly those equipped with M113s — presents certain considerations that are not generally issues with light infantry forces. For example, the mechanized infantry commander must consider the strength of his force, because if he leaves his carriers behind with their drivers and track commanders, his strength is reduced by nearly one-third. If he takes these personnel along, he must have a solid plan for returning them to the vehicle laager site as soon as the objective has been consolidated. Either way, there are trade-offs a commander must weigh against the factors of METT before he makes a decision.

The commander must also decide what heavy weapons the attacking echelon will take with it. Although it may be advantageous to have TOWs immediately available for long-range antiarmor support, the components of the dismounted system and the missiles are heavy, and it takes two

TOW squads to carry one system. This same problem applies to a battalion's 107mm mortars; true, these can be back-packed, but the weight is enormous and the soldiers who are designated to carry the components will find it hard to keep up with the dismounted infantry element.

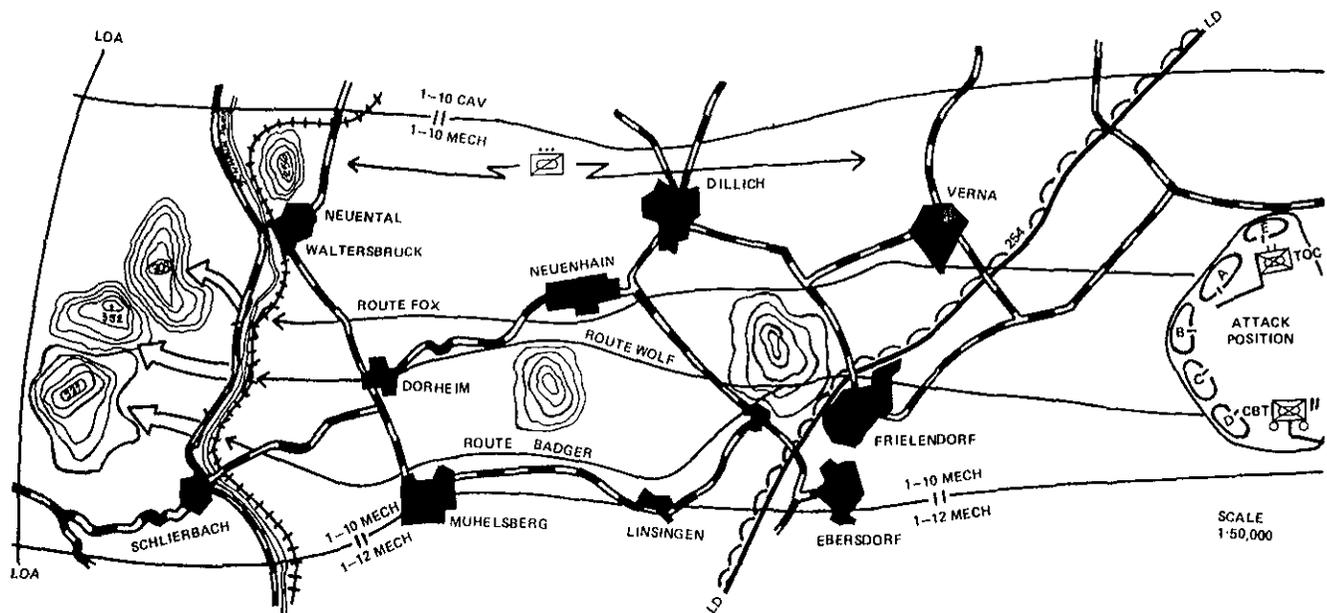
In addition, mechanized infantrymen have to be as physically fit as their light infantry counterparts for whom forced marches are a way of life. Unfortunately, though, some mechanized forces today tend to disregard the kind of sustained vigorous conditioning program necessary to get their soldiers in shape to execute arduous dismounted operations successfully.

Finally, command and control at battalion level presents a special problem in that the battalion's rear command post is not configured to accommodate dismounted operations without some sort of augmentation.

None of these considerations pose insurmountable obstacles, but they are factors unique to mechanized forces that must be assessed during the decision-making process.

The discussion that follows illustrates the value of a dismounted night attack as a means of keeping an opponent off-balance and adding a complementary dimension to mounted offensive operations.

During the maneuver phase of **REFORGER 83**, the 4th Infantry Division (Mechanized) was given an initial mission of penetrating the enemy's covering force, securing crossing sites over the Schwalm River, and continuing the attack into the main battle area. To accomplish this mission, the division commander chose to conduct dismounted night attacks



with three infantry-pure battalions to secure the high ground overlooking the designated crossing sites, and to follow these at first light with three armored task forces. The infantry mission was complicated by the requirement for the three battalions to march up to 14 miles and to cross an unfordable river before they could seize and secure the decisive terrain that dominated the crossing sites. The activities of one of these three infantry battalions will illustrate how this mission was accomplished.

Preparation and rehearsal were the keys to the battalion's success in this endeavor. Preparation began with an extensive reconnaissance of the approaches, the river, and the crossing sites. An analysis of this information led to the development of a tentative tactical plan that was refined through battle simulations and sand table exercises. Simultaneously, the battalion intensified its night training, conducted rehearsals at its home station, and augmented its physical training program with forced marches of up to 10 miles with full field gear. All attachments participated.

The scheme of maneuver for this operation called for the employment of three rifle companies (the fourth had been detached for another mission) along three separate directions of attack, each of which extended from the line of departure to the objective (see accompanying map). Cross-country movement was to be exploited to the greatest possible extent to avoid contact and to reach the objective with the least delay. Check points and phase lines were used to control this movement as well as to gauge the progress of the attack.

All vehicles were left behind in the attack position, and their drivers and commanders participated in the attack with their respective platoons. The entire antitank company (20 TOW systems) also remained in the attack position with instructions to move rapidly on order to pre-designated battle positions where it could place overwatching antitank fires along likely armor avenues of approach.

The mortar platoon was situated near the line of depart-

ure and was to provide on-call indirect fire support; it was also to displace to subsequent positions on order. The scout platoon screened the battalion's right flank with dismounted elements that were actually in position before hostilities began. Scout drivers and track commanders remained with their vehicles so that they could link up rapidly with the dismounted scout elements and move to forward screening positions once the objective had been secured. Attached engineer squads and Redeye teams accompanied each of the rifle companies to support the river crossing and provide first-light air defense.

The unfordable river ran parallel to the objective and about 1,000 meters from it. The battalion's plan called for the attacking units to use rope bridges and three-man inflatable rubber boats (easily carried) to get across the river. All three companies were to halt at a pre-designated phase line near the river, inflate their boats, and begin the crossing simultaneously.

Once the far bank was secured, the companies were to work their way to their objectives by using infiltration tactics, destroy any opposition, consolidate their positions, and prepare to meet counterattacks. The company on the left flank had an on-order mission to reconnoiter the bridge at Schlierbach and seize it if it was intact and weakly defended. The command group, also dismounted, was to follow the left flank company and monitor the progress of the attack through reports of phase line crossings.

When its preparations were complete, the companies moved out of the battalion attack position just after midnight and crossed the line of departure along the three specified directions of attack. As a result of its detailed reconnaissance effort, its intensive intelligence gathering work, and its thorough terrain analysis, the battalion had a reasonably accurate picture of the disposition of the enemy's covering force elements. Therefore, the company commanders adjusted their routes to bypass those points where enemy concentrations were expected.

The attack proceeded on schedule all the way to the river, with a single brief interruption when an enemy machinegun opened fire on the right flank company. After a grueling 13-mile march through foot-deep snow, with each soldier carrying a 60-pound rucksack, the three companies reached their crossing site within 15 minutes of each other. To afford the best surprise and protection, the crossing sites had been selected specifically at points where no roads existed. The boats were inflated and moved to the river, and the soldiers began the crossing in groups of three at approximately 0530. Thirty minutes later, all elements had crossed undetected and regrouped to begin infiltrating the objective.

At this point in the operation, a fortuitous circumstance occurred: The reconnaissance element from the left flank company discovered that the Schlierbach bridge was intact and only lightly defended. Since possession of this bridge would expedite the passage of the follow-on armor units and complicate the enemy's withdrawal of his bypassed covering force elements, the company was ordered to seize it. Attacking both ends simultaneously, the company quickly overwhelmed the defenders and took control of the bridge. Leaving one platoon and its attached engineers to protect the bridge, the company resumed its advance toward its objective.

The battalion had divided its objective, which was the decisive terrain dominating the approaches to the river, into three smaller company objectives. The companies moved quickly toward their objectives, using great stealth and no preparatory fire. All three attacking elements succeeded in infiltrating their objectives and completely surprising the defenders. They then conducted sweeps to clear their objectives to the limit of advance, and each company established contact with the unit on its flank. By 0730 the battalion objective was declared secure and the follow-on armor task force had a clear path across the Schwalm River.

Because the division commander's intent was to get his armor across the river rapidly, the battalion's link-up with its carriers was delayed until the entire armor task force had passed through the battalion's position. Carrier link-up was then accomplished later in the day by trucking the drivers and track commanders back to the attack position and moving the carriers forward under the control of the company executive officers to pre-designated link-up points. By 1400 the entire battalion had been reassembled and was ready to continue the attack.

The night attack had been an unqualified success — it had unhinged the opponent's defense, forced the enemy to make a premature commitment of his reserves, and obstructed the withdrawal of the enemy covering force into its main battle area position. The armor units were able to penetrate deep into the enemy's rear areas and disrupt his entire defensive plan. By day's end, the division's lead

elements had reached a point some 30 kilometers from their line of departure and had sustained comparatively few losses in the process.

Several significant observations can be made as a result of this successful operation. First, night is the ally of the infantryman and negates many of the advantages enjoyed by a defender who occupies good defensive terrain and has sophisticated optics and weapon systems. Second, despite its limited dismounted strength, a properly organized and trained mechanized infantry battalion can use a night attack to accomplish at small cost what would probably be a very expensive endeavor during broad daylight. Finally, some risks must be accepted if such an operation is to be conducted with speed and stealth. Specifically, dismounted elements must rely upon medium-range Dragon antiarmor fires until the TOW systems of the antitank company can be brought forward, and infantrymen must be able to repel counterattacks without their normal caliber .50 machinegun support and rapid maneuver capability until a carrier link-up can be achieved. In this particular instance, however, the surprise and momentum achieved by the dismounted night attack reduced these risks to acceptable proportions.

The unsupported, nonilluminated, dismounted night attack remains a highly effective and desirable part of our offensive doctrine. To succeed, the tactical plan must be simple, thoroughly rehearsed, and vigorously executed. Detailed reconnaissance is absolutely indispensable in formulating and executing the plan; without it, the risks inherent in a night attack are magnified considerably.

Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's observations on this subject in *Attacks* lend additional credence to this precept: "While the exhausted troops rested, the officers were untiringly active in determining precise information regarding the enemy and the terrain. Even after midnight they continued reconnoitering.... Thus they created the basis for the successful penetration...."

There is no reason, therefore, to believe that only special operations forces can conduct dismounted night attacks. The mechanized infantryman, if he is well prepared to do so, can also use his position in the combined arms team to conduct successful night attacks.



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